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E.C. proposes plan to curb lead contamination

CLAUDINE CHAMBERLAIN Oct 28, 1992

EAST CHICAGO - The results aren't in yet from recent samples of lead in East

Chicago's drinking water, but chemist Art Modrowski knows what they'll show.

"We're not gonna pass," he predicted Tuesday.

The city's lead service lines are old and tend to leach lead into the water

system, he said. On Thursday, the city's Water Department will present to the

public a plan for curbing the lead contamination.

The meeting will be held at 10 a.m. at the Water Department, 400 E. Chicago

Ave.

City officials want to add anti-corrosion chemicals to the water system. The

chemicals - known as ortho and polyphosphate corrosion inhibitors - flow

through the water system and form a coating on lead service pipes. That coating

keeps lead from entering the water.

The program would cost about \$50,000 annually, placing an additional burden

on an already strained water budget, said Utility Director Donald Lang. The

city is considering rate increases to help pay for the anti-corrosion chemicals

and other programs, he said.

The city began the program on its own, but probably would have been required to use a similar system eventually. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency requires municipalities that don't meet a tighter lead standard to add anti-corrosion chemicals to their water.

Lead is a toxic metal commonly used in water pipes until it was outlawed in 1986. Persistent exposure to lead has been shown to cause hyperactivity and lower IQ levels in children and high blood pressure in adults.

In July, medium-size cities were required to begin testing lead levels in homes with lead water pipes.

New federal regulations establish significantly lower limits for the amount of lead allowed in public water. The new rules allow only 15 parts per billion of lead in drinking water; the previous standard was 50 parts per billion.

East Chicago, along with most other communities in Northwest Indiana, began testing water in July. Although the results are not yet available, Modrowski said he has suspected a lead problem in East Chicago for at least four years.

He added that he has tried over those years to convince city officials to add the anti-corrosion chemicals to the water system. However, the expense of the program was considered too high, he said.

"We're not gonna pass (the July tests)," he said. "That's why I was hoping to have had this stuff in there already."

Cities like Chicago and Gary have been putting anti-corrosion chemicals into their water systems for several years, he said.

Modrowski estimated that 90 percent of the city's service lines are lead.

The city's water is fine as it leaves the filtration plant, but absorbs lead as

it sits in the service lines, he said.

The EPA-mandated testing took samples of water from home faucets first thing

in the morning, after the water had been still for several hours. That reading

provides a worst-case scenario.

If the public approves of the project, the city will seek a permit from the

Indiana Department of Environmental Management. If the permit is granted, the

city will seek bids from companies to provide the chemicals and proper

equipment, Lang said.

If residents are concerned about lead in drinking water, the highest

contamination levels can be avoided by running the tap for a few minutes each

morning to flush out the system.